



## MAYOR DEKE COPENHAVER

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## Press Release

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**Re: Mayor Copenhaver's State of the Region Address**

The following speech was given by Mayor Copenhaver at the Leadership Augusta's State of the Region luncheon this afternoon.

As I stand before you today, the state of our region is defined both by great strengths that reflect a bright future and large, though undoubtedly surmountable, obstacles which underscore an often tumultuous past. We are a region marked both by remarkable prosperity and abject poverty. A region known for both international acclaim and an often disturbing tendency towards local disdain. A region with a rich history of innovation and a recent propensity to take our wealth of community assets for granted as opposed to leveraging these assets to propel ourselves into a position of sustainable economic prosperity. Make no mistake about it, my friends, we have challenges to overcome. But mark my words, we are a region destined to fulfill our unlimited potential and today I would like to challenge you all to take part in making this happen. At this very moment, we, as a region bound together by a common heritage and a shared destiny, are witnessing the dawning of a new day in which our limitless potential can, and will, be fulfilled by a renewed spirit of mutual cooperation among our governments and our citizenry alike. There is much work to be done and the road ahead towards a regional prosperity the likes of which we have not yet seen will not be

without its pitfalls, but I have absolutely no doubt that by working together, we will reach our destination.

The wealth of assets blessing our community is undeniable. With a thriving medical community, a strong military base whose missions are expanding, a clean and abundant water source in the Savannah River, the Savannah River Site and highly regarded institutions of higher learning including Augusta State University, the Medical College of Georgia, Paine College and Augusta Technical College, we are provided with a strong foundation on which to build. Our quality of life, exemplified by an affordable housing market, a renowned arts community, a vast array of recreational opportunities and a temperate climate, confers upon us the opportunity to further build upon our economic development efforts to recruit new residents and businesses. Our manufacturing base offers expansion opportunities which other regions of similar size can only dream of. Our region's national and international reputation continues to grow as we are not only the home of both the Masters Golf Tournament and the legendary "godfather of soul" Mr. James Brown, but also the host of both the opening of the Tour De Georgia cycling race, internationally regarded as the finest race of its kind in North America and the Augusta Futurity, the largest cutting horse event east of the Mississippi River.

In moving forward, we, as a region, must capitalize on the leveraging opportunities afforded us by the aforementioned assets that are but a glimpse of what our community has to offer. Through our cutting edge Medical Community, we have the opportunity to focus on making the Metro Augusta Region a hub for biotechnology development.

Each year, one thousand individuals highly trained in information technology leave Fort Gordon. A recent study shows that 60% of these men and women would like

to remain in the region. With such a labor resource at our disposal, we must focus on recruiting businesses here that can put these individuals to work locally.

Each year, our institutions of higher learning produce a group of well educated and highly motivated individuals who must be given the opportunity to stay in the local market place as opposed to seeking work in greater metropolitan areas such as Atlanta and Charlotte. We must keep our best and brightest at home in order for our region to have a sustainable prosperity. These young men and women are the lifeblood of our future and represent the leaders of tomorrow.

Our international reputation must be used to further foreign investment in our local economy. This reputation, along with our proximity to the busiest airport in the world in Atlanta's Hartsfield International, must be used to ensure that the Metro Augusta Region becomes a player in the global economy. I applaud the strong and ongoing efforts of the Augusta Regional Airport Commission to improve air service to our region, an effort which is key to our region's future economic development.

In Destination 2020, a visionary plan initiated by Leadership Augusta and developed through countless hours of volunteer work by citizens from throughout our region, we now have a roadmap towards a bright and prosperous future. Having served on the environmental issues committee, the mega projects committee and the editorial committee, I can assure you that this comprehensive and inclusive plan serves as a fine example of just what can be accomplished when our governments, our private sector and our citizenry set aside all differences and work together towards a common goal. With a primary focus on just the type of regional cooperation necessary to unleash our vast, and at times untapped, potential, Destination 2020 has established a concrete list of objectives for our region covering issues from future economic development to the protection and enhancement of our quality of life and all points in between. These strategic objectives have been developed with the mindset of ensuring active

participation from all sectors of our community, from neighborhood associations and local governments to our business community and non profit organizations, in order to ensure that this living plan becomes a reality. Thus, we are all provided an opportunity to get involved and stay involved with the process of building a stronger region. I applaud Leadership Augusta for your visionary efforts to make our region the “best mid-sized metropolitan area in the country” by the year 2020 and encourage our entire community to not only support Destination 2020, but to actively participate in its implementation.

Just this week, we received word that our local Salvation Army has received preliminary approval to be awarded 71 million dollars in grant funds to build a Kroc Center in the Harrisburg Community. Upon completion, this innovative and visionary project will ultimately lead to a one-hundred seven a half million dollar investment in Augusta which stands to spur the redevelopment of our City Center. This is a remarkable example of just what the “can do” mentality of local citizens can lead to.

Our region’s economic development efforts have been marked by many recent successes. In 2005, the Development Authority of Richmond County had the best recruitment year in their history with more than 1600 new jobs announced with an investment of more than 220 million dollars. Over the past year, our economic development organizations have begun to further coordinate their efforts in order to allow for a greater ease of recruiting new businesses and residents to Augusta. In order to build upon these efforts, I have convened monthly meetings with the heads of our local economic development organizations, the first of which was held just this past Wednesday. As Mayor of Augusta, it is my firm belief that I should serve in the role of Augusta’s lead salesman and I look forward to working with our economic development community to help facilitate their already proactive and prosperous efforts to grow our region’s economy. Through many meetings with officials at the state level, I can assure

you all that the rest of Georgia is fully aware of the fact that a more healthy and prosperous Metro Augusta region will lead to a more healthy and prosperous Georgia. In May, Augusta will play host to the annual board meeting of the Georgia Department of Economic Development. I would like to take this opportunity to personally thank Commissioner Craig Lesser and the entire board for granting our region the privilege of hosting this meeting. Having had the opportunity to work with Governor Perdue on last year's Red Carpet Tour for Georgia, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Governor for his innovative and progressive efforts to grow Georgia's economy to the benefit of all of our State's citizens. Governor Perdue, you're doing a great job and you should be commended.

Though our region's present state is promising and our future looks bright, we must not overlook the difficulties currently facing us as addressing these issues head is the best way to help ensure our future prosperity. After all, a region, as with any organization, is only as strong as its weakest link.

As Mayor of Augusta, I am disturbed by our City's recent multi-million dollar budget shortfalls. We, as a City, must no longer turn to our reserve funds to cover the shortfalls as the continuance of this practice is nothing short of fiscal mismanagement. We must be proactive with addressing our budget woes to position ourselves on a sound financial footing. With this in mind, I have just this week introduced an initiative, unanimously approved by the Commission, to inventory our government's ten most marketable pieces of open land which no longer serve a public purpose. I have proposed that these properties, non-performing assets which have no good reason to remain on our City's balance sheet, be auctioned off to the highest bidder in order to address our current projected budget shortfall while returning them to the tax base where they belong. Thus, they can once again begin to return much needed tax revenue to our City's finances.

Much is still made of Augusta being a community divided along racial lines. I cannot stress enough that every citizen must make every effort to erase these lines, whether real or perceived, in order for our community to move forward. I have often said that where some see a community divided, I see a community yearning to come together. For evidence of this, we need look no further than the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast for unity. Started just three short months ago and now held in partnership with the Community Trust Initiative, has grown exponentially since its inception with more than 150 citizens of our community joining together in common prayer just last Tuesday. This joyous group represented true diversity as it was comprised of individuals of different races, age groups and denominations. I would encourage all those interested in participating in these breakfast meetings, held monthly at churches throughout the community, simply to contact my office as all are welcome.

In recent years, our region has had a disturbing tendency to all too often define ourselves as a group of separate entities working in competition with, as opposed to in conjunction with, each other. Augusta represents a microcosm of this issue as individuals from throughout our community often define themselves as being from South Augusta, East Augusta or West Augusta. We, as a community and as a region, must move past this mindset and realize that a rising tide benefits us all while a sinking ship will slowly but surely drag us all to the bottom. As Mayor of Augusta, I am fully committed to working with the governments of our entire region to build upon ongoing efforts to foster a greater working relationship and a renewed sense of regional cooperation.

In the end, it is my firm belief that we, as a region, are neither totally defined by our shortcomings, which we no doubt have the ability to overcome, nor our strengths, of which we are blessed to have many. The State of our region today is best defined by an asset blessing our region in abundance that is often difficult to define. An asset that

visitors to our region can sense every time they choose to spend time soaking up the aura that surrounds us. An asset that I see reflected in the eyes of volunteers who believe in their community and who are committed to making our region a better place to work, live and play. An asset that I believe will overcome all obstacles facing us and lead us forward to the sustainable prosperity that we all want to be a part of. In the end, the State of our region is defined by the spirit of our people. Thus, my friends, the state of our region is strong, and getting stronger every day. Thank you.